

DEER HOUND HUNTER FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY
NOVEMBER 14, 2007; FARMVILLE, VA

GROUP PROFILE

The Deer Hound Hunter focus group took place on November 14, 2007, in Farmville, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern about the use of hounds in hunting in the state. Approximately twenty-five deer hound hunters were invited to attend this focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community. Twenty individuals attended the focus group meeting; eighteen were males, two were female; all were white.

All participants identified themselves as avid deer hound hunters. Many participants indicated that they also participate in other types of hunting with hounds - including deer, fox, raccoon, rabbit and turkey - and without hounds - deer with archery and muzzleloader,. One participant identified himself as a landowner; one as a trapper. Nearly all participants belonged to one or more local hunt clubs. Many were also members of a regional or state-level hunting dog alliance. Comments made during this focus group meeting, and summarized in this report, do not necessarily reflect the views of all members of these organizations; however, it is informative to note the breadth of interests involved.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in? Do you hunt deer with and without hounds?

Participants indicated that hunting with dogs is a way of life for them and that many of them hunt nearly everyday of the deer season. As some of the participants put it,

“I can’t imagine what it would be like to not be able to hunt with hounds here in Virginia.”

“There is no other way to hunt, in my opinion.”

“Hunting, as it has been described so far tonight in this room, is really a cultural event rather than recreation.”

Many of the participants recalled being introduced to hunting with hounds at a young age by their fathers or grandfathers. That aspect of hunting with hounds, i.e., introducing kids to hunting was cited as an important part of the experience, as evidenced by the following quotes:

“Hunting with hounds is very good for getting children involved because you don’t meet any children who do not like dogs.”

“I have taken my son with me and he loves it because he doesn’t have to be quiet or be still for a very long period of time.”

“I’m here tonight really for my grandchildren because I want to see them have the opportunity that I have had over the years.”

Participants also indicated that running the hounds and listening to them work is more important to them than killing a deer. Several of them said that if they couldn’t hunt with dogs, they probably wouldn’t hunt at all and that their hunting clubs would probably fold if they could not hunt with dogs. For example, one hunter said,

“Hunting with dogs, to me, is hunting. If I couldn’t hunt with dogs, I wouldn’t hunt.”

“I’m out there to listen to my dogs run. That’s the main reason I’m out there.”

The social aspect of hunting with hounds rated highly with participants, as many of them cited the camaraderie of hound hunting as an important aspect of the experience. For example,

“The camaraderie we enjoy, the fellowship we enjoy, while we are hunting with hounds is a very integral part of it.”

“There are special bonds that are formed at hunt clubs.”

What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?

Participants identified the camaraderie, fellowship and family/social aspects, particularly the involvement of children, of hunting with hounds as a very important component of the experience. They also identified the pleasure and pride they take in working hounds and listening to them do their jobs.

In the areas where you hunt, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?

Participants noted that rapid development of real estate and urban sprawl have severely affected the availability of lands for hunting with hounds.

“I think you have see a lot of it in the last few years, you’ve seen a real estate boom. Everything is being developed so much, a lot of land you cannot hunt any more.”

“Fragmentation of farmland is one of the greatest threats we face for any kind of hunting, not just hound hunting.”

“Unfortunately, most of us who farm, accumulate some land maybe and some equipment, the only retirement sometimes is to cash in some of it. That land very seldom gets sold as a block, it gets fragmented. So instead of a 200-acre farm, you have 5 or 10 farmettes.”

“I grew up on a farm and I probably made better money raising tobacco 30 years ago than I do today. But there’s not a market for our tobacco and my brother and my sister and I, we couldn’t make a living on the farm.”

Along with the fragmentation of the landscape, participants lamented the changing character of rural communities as new residents often bring new values with them—including a low tolerance for hunting with hounds.

“Land is still relatively cheap in Southside Virginia compared to lot of the rest of the country, so it is like a magnet that draws people.”

“People not understanding a rural way of life, that is an important part of it also...It would be best if people were informed of some of these issues before they sign on the dotted line...there are disclosures in these real estate deals for everything else.”

“I believe Boards of Supervisors can require, maybe realtors, to inform people when they move into rural communities, that things happen a little bit differently in rural communities.”

“They love riding out on Sunday, they like seeing cows in the pasture, but they don’t like smelling cow manure.”

“We have done a very poor job of assimilating people that move into the community into the community—we don’t visit them, we don’t try to get to know them.”

“When I was a kid growing up, I didn’t know too many places I couldn’t hunt. Now I don’t know too many places I can. Every time somebody moves in with a New Jersey or New York or Pennsylvania license tag, the first thing they do is put up a No Hunting sign. These people come in with their own value system, with their own ideas of how things should be and they want us to change to that.”

“We want these folks to respect our way of living, where we have come from, how we have done it. I respect...saying we have done this all our lives, we don’t own it all anymore. It is their piece of land. I don’t like to see [all the new posted signs] but just because I walked on it for 50 years, doesn’t mean I can walk on it today without asking. We have to realize it has changed.”

They also noted that timber companies are raising their prices for leases, and in some cases, choosing not to lease to hunt clubs that use hounds to hunt.

“The only piece of land we lost, that we don’t dog hunt, is where timber companies, they leased it, well, our lease is up to over \$14,000...we had one block we released it because we just couldn’t afford to carry it any more.”

What do you think is the most important issue that faces hunters who use hounds?

Participants spent considerable time addressing two questions: are complaints about hound hunting common enough to warrant this study? how can hunters do a better job of policing their own ranks? Discussion regarding the number and nature of complaints focused on whether or not the VDGIF is over reacting to a few complaints in conducting this study. For example:

“I also feel very strongly that the state needs to tell us precisely what those complaints and comments are. I don’t know what they are. I can’t do nothing if I don’t know what they are.”

Some participants believed the problem is more with landowners who don’t understand local customs than with hunting with hounds. For example:

“The people that are causing the problems, and there is probably not that many, but the dogs are the easiest thing for them to pick on. I mean, they don’t want hunting, period, but they can pick on the dogs. If we have land we can’t hunt, we are not going to hunt it. We’ll just drive right on by it. But the dogs go across it, and they see that a couple of times a week and think, ‘They are hunting my land!’ There is nothing we can do about the dogs. I can’t see what kind of a problem a dog would be running a deer across somebody’s land anyhow. Even if we get the dogs, it is going to be something else. I mean, you are not going to satisfy everybody”

Finally, several participants commented that hound hunters need to do a better job of policing themselves and dealing with their own issues. They also suggested that the VDGIF could help them in identifying issues and dealing with them. For example:

“I have a friend of mine who owns maybe 350 acres. He comes down maybe three or four times a year to hunt during bow season or muzzle loading season. He would drive down and get in a stand for maybe 5 minutes and here would come a pack of hounds through it—and this is during bow hunting and muzzle loading. We need to think about more what we are doing.”

“One underlying theme that I am hearing with a lot of comments is that we need to do a better job of policing ourselves, and if there are people out there who are giving us a black eye, if they belong to the hunt club, the hunt club has the responsibility of taking care of that. I don’t think that... many of us have the capacity to deal with that and educate, and deal with those issues at the time that they arise. Wouldn’t it be nice if there was someone from Game and Inland Fisheries or a university or a consultant or something that could come in and help hunt clubs identify the issues that are causing problems and then give us the skills to deal with those issues, so that we can have conflict management, we can have, you know, ideas from other hunt clubs of what you do to welcome landowners and do things like that.”

SUMMARY

Overall, participants in the Farmville Deer Hound Hunter focus group meeting were all passionate about hunting, especially hunting deer with hounds. All indicated that hound hunting was important to them as a way to spend time with family and friends, especially as a way to involve children in hunting, and an important component of their cultural identity. Participants indicated that urban sprawl and development have impacted the availability of land for hunting. Further, participants noted a reduced tolerance for hunting by newcomers to their areas. Participants expressed concern about the need for this Study and indicated that problems may stem from intolerant landowners, not hound hunting. However, they also noted that hound hunters need to do a better job of policing themselves and supporting each other in the resolution of conflicts.